

CLAIMS

What is claimed is:

1. An electronic communication service method comprising:

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subscribing users to the electronic communication service using conventional name and conventional postal address information;

subscribing businesses to the electronic communication service;

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receiving direct mail advertising materials from the businesses; and

sending the direct mail advertising materials to the users over the Internet using the conventional name and conventional postal address information.

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2. The method of claim 1 wherein e-mail addresses of said users are maintained in confidence.

3. The method of claim 2 wherein said e-mail addresses are maintained in confidence during and after any transactions between users and businesses.

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4. The method of claim 1 further comprising:

allowing said users to provide e-mail addresses and aliases; and

5 consolidating electronic mail from said e-mail addresses and said aliases at a single location.

5. The method of claim 1 further comprising using a newsgroup server to post and allow users to selectively retrieve electronic communications.

6. The method of claim 1 further comprising sorting said direct mail advertising materials according to pre-defined categories.

7. The method of claim 6 further comprising sorting said direct mail advertising materials according to user-defined categories.

8. The method of claim 1 further comprising:

obtaining demographic information from the users; and

allowing the businesses to send the direct mail advertising materials to the user based upon said demographic information.

9. The method of claim 1 further comprising allowing the users to specify types of the direct mail advertising materials which the users wish to receive.

10. The method of claim 1 further comprising allowing said users to browse offers

5 matched and unmatched to a user's categories of interest.

11. The method of claim 1 further comprising sending conventional postal mail when a user does not have an e-mail address or prefers to receive direct mail advertising materials by conventional postal mail.

12. The method of claim 1 wherein the conventional name and the conventional postal address information is converted to e-mail addresses through a mapping function.

13. The method of claim 1 further comprising screening undesired electronic mail and undesired offers from users.

14. The method of claim 1 further comprising charging the businesses for sending the direct mail advertising materials.

15. The method of claim 14 further comprising charging the businesses for sending the direct mail advertising materials on the basis of the amount of direct mail advertising materials sent.

16. The method of claim 14 further comprising charging the businesses for sending the direct mail advertising materials on the basis of the amount of direct mail advertising materials received by the users.

17. The method of claim 14 further comprising charging the businesses for converting said conventional postal address mailing lists to e-mail addresses.

18. An electronic communication service method for a user comprising:

subscribing to the electronic communication service through a user interface using conventional name and conventional postal address information;

obtaining an account;

providing user preferences; and

receiving over the Internet mailing information offered by businesses over the electronic communication service and matched to said user preferences based upon said conventional name and said conventional postal address information.

19. The method of claim 18 further comprising:

providing demographic information; and

5 receiving targeted direct mail advertising materials from the businesses based upon said demographic information.

20. The method of claim 18 further comprising receiving communications screened for undesired electronic mail and undesired offers.

10 21. The method of claim 18 wherein correspondence is sent and received without disclosing e-mail addresses.

15 22. The method of claim 18 wherein said mailing information may be sorted according to categories.

23. The method of claim 18 further comprising:

providing e-mail addresses and aliases; and

20 consolidating electronic mail from said e-mail addresses and said aliases at a single location.

24. The method of claim 18 further comprising receiving conventional postal mail when the user does not have an e-mail address or prefers to receive direct mail advertising materials by conventional postal mail.

5 25. The method of claim 18 further comprising browsing offers matched and unmatched against said user preferences.

26. An electronic communication service method for a business comprising:

10 subscribing to the electronic communication service;

obtaining a business account;

15 providing direct mail advertising materials from the business to the electronic communication service;

providing conventional name and conventional postal address information from the business to the electronic communication service; and

20 allowing the service to send said direct mail advertising materials to a plurality of users over the Internet using said conventional name and said conventional postal address information provided by the business.

27. The method of claim 26 further comprising allowing the business to create target contact lists based upon a plurality of interested users.

28. The method of claim 26 further comprising:

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obtaining demographic information from a plurality of users; and

targeting said direct mail advertising materials to said plurality of users based upon said demographic information.

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29. A method of screening undesired electronic mail in an electronic communication service which comprises:

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scanning an incoming mail message for an incoming sending source designation, an incoming domain designation, and an incoming text body;

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generating a plurality of comparison index values from the incoming source designation, the incoming domain designation, and the incoming text body; and

20 identifying the incoming mail message as undesirable in response to a positive comparison between said plurality of comparison index values and known SPAM sources.

30. The method of claim 29 wherein said identification is determined by the probability that the message is from an unwanted source, the frequency with which content appears in messages in the service, the number of hyperlinks, and the targets of the hyperlinks.

5 31. The method of claim 29 further comprising:

logging the incoming mail message in a SPAM database;

updating a SPAM log database; and

discarding the incoming message.

32. The method of claim 30 wherein the weighing of the factors can be varied by a system administrator.

33. The method of claim 29 further comprising:

scanning an incoming mail message for an incoming hypertext link;

generating a plurality of comparison index values from the incoming hyperlink; and

comparing the plurality of comparison index values to the SPAM database.

34. A method of providing an electronic communication service at a remote location comprising:

providing software at the remote location;

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subscribing users at the remote location using conventional name and conventional postal address information;

subscribing businesses to the electronic communication service;

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receiving direct mail advertising materials from the businesses at the remote location;

connecting the remote location to the electronic communication service; and

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sending the direct mail advertising materials to the users over the Internet using the conventional name and conventional postal address information.

35. The method of claim 34 wherein the step of subscribing businesses to the electronic communication service comprises subscribing the businesses at a remote location.

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36. The method of claim 34 wherein the step of subscribing business to the electronic communication service comprises subscribing the businesses at a local location.

37. An electronic communication service apparatus comprising:

means for subscribing users to said electronic communication service apparatus using conventional name and conventional postal address information;

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means for subscribing businesses to said electronic communication service apparatus;

means for receiving direct mail advertising materials from said businesses; and

10 means for targeting said direct mail advertising materials to said users over the Internet using said conventional name and said conventional postal address information;

15 wherein when said users and said businesses are subscribed to said electronic communication service apparatus, said direct mail advertising materials are retrieved from said businesses and targeted to said users.

38. The apparatus of claim 37 wherein said means for targeting preserves an e-mail account of a user in confidence.

20 39. The apparatus of claim 37 wherein said means for targeting preserves an e-mail account of a user in confidence after a transaction has occurred.

40. The apparatus of claim 37 further comprising means for consolidating electronic mail originating from a plurality of e-mail addresses and aliases at a single location.

41. The apparatus of claim 37 further comprising means for sorting said direct mail
5 advertising materials according to pre-defined categories.

42. The apparatus of claim 37 wherein said means for targeting allows conventional postal mail to be sent when a user does not have an e-mail address or prefers to receive the direct mail advertising materials by conventional postal mail.

43. The apparatus of claim 37 further comprising:

means for receiving conventional postal address mailing list from the businesses; and

means for converting said postal address mailing lists to e-mail addresses.

44. The apparatus of claim 37 further comprising means for screening undesired electronic mail and undesired offers from the users.